THE HINDU
Sunday, February 22, 2026

magazine

backpage
Tracing Indo-French textile history in Paris
GO TO » PAGE 8

INSIDE
What Afghanistan's first rom-com looks like
GO TO » PAGE 4

LITERARY REVIEW
Author Geoff Dyer and his singular way of writing
GO TO » PAGE 3

Track the latest stories via #ThMagazine on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) Get connected » www.thehindu.com

"Clothes gather the person who wears them. They carry gestures, posture, mood. That's their inheritance"

SUKET DHIR

Custodians (Clockwise from left) Suket Dhir's daughter wants to inherit his bomber jackets; photographer Ronny Sen; author Aanchal Malhotra in her grandmother's silk sari; restaurateur Samyukta Nair; and filmmaker Gourab Ganguli. (TWISHA AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

"There are many objects in my possession. If you are someone who has spent time caring for the past, then objects from the past find you. Naturally, this is a privilege, but it also means that you must carry the stories, the memories, the joy and pain associated with these things and the person they once belonged to"

AANCHAL MALHOTRA
Author and historian

In an age of AI-generated stories and friction-maxxing, objects take on renewed meaning. Creatives from Samyukta Nair to Gourab Ganguli share the heirlooms they hold dear

THE CLOSET AS INHERITANCE

Sushmita Grewal

You can't wear this shawl to the wedding. Please look for something else as a pullover," he said. He meant well. He always did. That it wasn't just my favourite shawl? That it had been worn by my mother, my *maasi*, and both my sisters? That it had been worn by all the women in my family, travelling from Kolkata to Rohtak to Delhi – accompanying every trip and every home.

That my heart had broken the day ash fell on it?

It's visibly worn. And yet, I still love it. I love it because of the character it has built over the years, the memories it carries.

In Indian households, closets are rarely just about style. They are memory chests. Every kurta, sari, and sweater is a relic from the people we've loved, the people we've lost, or the people we've outgrown. A hoodie from your first heartbreak; a kurta from college that still smells of freedom. Perhaps this is why inheritance feels instinctive in Indian homes.

And in this moment of time, when AI (artificial intelligence) can help anyone generate images, words, even histories in seconds, when it is increasingly difficult to tell what has been made by a human hand and what has not, such objects take on renewed meaning. A worn sari, an ash-marked shawl carry something no algorithm can reproduce: proof of having lived.

Or, think of it as friction-maxxing – holding close the things that give texture to life (not eliminating the old and the worn in favour of convenience).

In India, we don't live spare lives, embracing minimalism like the Scandinavians. We accumulate not out of excess either, but because objects here are rarely just functional. They are mnemonic devices. In households shaped by movement, migration, and memory, we learn to live with layers: of fabric, of people, of time. We keep the old not because it is useful, but because it remembers us.

The earliest memory I have of my mother is her wearing these thin gold hoops. Medium-sized, nothing elaborate, worn every day, with two slender bangles. She has tanned skin and light brown hair that chemo took from her; when it returned, it was black, short, and stubbornly alive. She's 5'8", strong-featured, and impossibly kind.

When she handed me those hoops, she gave me everything. Her strength, her beauty, her story. I wear them now. They're my favourites – by inheritance, not design.

Stories behind the fabric

Delhi-based author and historian Aanchal Malhotra, 36, speaks to this emotional gravity with her usual poise. "The thing about inheriting objects [even from people you've never met] is that the story is a mixture: part memory, part imagination," says Malhotra, who is also the co-founder of Museum of Material Memory, a crowdsourced digital repository of material culture of the Indian subcontinent.

She tells me about an orange and grey silk sari once worn by her maternal grandmother. "It's an unusual colour combination, but striking. I never met her; she died before I was born. But I wondered where she would have bought it from or worn it to. The thing about inheriting objects from people you have never met is that the story is often a mixture of other people's memories and your imagination.

The images are part-borrowed, part-conjured, a mix of nostalgia and curiosity. For Malhotra, inherited clothes become portals. "I look for remnants – a scent, a tear, a crease in the pleats. Someone ironed it, folded it, chose it once. That act of choosing becomes a part of the garment's story." Even when a sari tears, she doesn't discard it. "I've patched, reinforced, reused. Anything to hold on to it. Maybe it's nostalgia, or maybe some part of a person really is preserved in fabric."

"India itself is still healing. We forget our parents and grandparents saw a different world — one without emotional vocabulary. So we inherited their silence, their survival mode. Now we are the generation trying to build new meaning. Everything we hold is a self-portrait. Even a blanket. Even a shirt. We choose what becomes part of our story"

GOURAB GANGULI
PHOTOGRAPHER AND DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

Gucci bags and bomber jackets

In Mumbai, Samyukta Nair, 40, holds on to glamour with grace. Her favourite pieces come from her paternal grandmother, Leela – vintage Chanel bags, worn-in Gucci, souvenirs from a lifetime of global travel with her grandfather, Captain Nair, founder of The Leela Palaces, Hotels & Resorts. "To this day, I still carry them," she says. "And I'm often stopped by strangers, unaware that these bags carry decades of stories."

But her most sentimental pieces are the Kanjeevaram and Banarasi saris. "My grandmother wore a sari every day – not for occasion, but as an extension of self. I don't wear them, but I run my hands over the fabric, catch a trace of her perfume. It's enough. It brings her back to me. These pieces aren't just beautiful; they are threads of memory," says Samyukta, who heads design and operations at The Leela. Inheriting fashion is about passing down values, of craftsmanship, culture, care.

Then there's Suket Dhir, 45, whose denim jacket from 1973, thick 14-ounce denim, was first worn by his father at 25, passed on to a cousin, and finally reclaimed. "It's soft now, shaped by time," he shares. "It softened through wear and took shape, I can never let it go."

Dhir's own inheritance wasn't just emotional, it was formative. "I was the coolest kid in boarding school because I wore my grandfather's high-quality merino trousers. Everyone else had polyester suits. My friends borrowed clothes from me to go home on Sundays."

He's already got his daughter eyeing his bombers. "I'm in the business of making heirlooms, not trends," he says. "Clothes that stand the test of time: silhouette, textile, soul." But he also lets go of what no longer fits his sensibility. "Not everything needs to be held. Some things need to continue their life on someone else."

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4

This 1812 painting by British soldier Hyder Young Hearsey shows him and fellow explorer William Moorcroft disguised as Indian holy men (left) on yaks, travelling in Tibet; (bottom) author Deepa Anappara. (GETTY IMAGES, LIZ SEABROOK)

INTERVIEW

MAPPING IMPERIALISM

Author Deepa Anappara subverts tropes to examine colonial ambition and whitewashing of history in *The Last of Earth*

Julie Merin Varughese
julie.m.v@thehindu.co.in

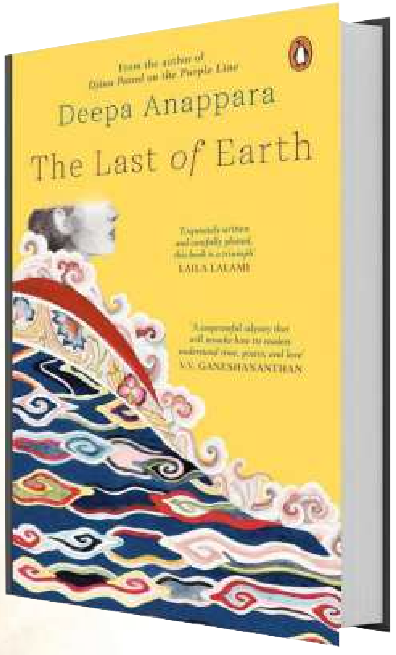
In her sweeping historical novel, *The Last of Earth* (published by Penguin), set in late 19th century British India, former journalist Deepa Anappara weaves a dual narrative of friendship and imperial ambition. The story follows Balram, an Indian schoolteacher engaged as a surveyor-spy by a British officer who embarks on a perilous expedition into Tibet after its borders have been closed to Europeans. "It's in the nature of white men to believe they own the world, that no door should be shut to them," Balram recalls his father telling him when he was a boy.

Also on a mission to open doors, though for different reasons, is Katherine, a 50-year-old explorer in disguise. As their paths cross on the Himalayan mountain passes and true identities and intentions come to light, the novel reflects on the uneasy partnership between coloniser and colonised. "I was interested in looking at who is considered an explorer and who becomes a coolie," says London-based Anappara, whose debut novel, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*, was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2020. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Question: *What inspired the historical setting of* The Last of Earth?

Answer: In 2009, I came across an Englishman's account of travelling through Tibet in the 19th century, where he referred to his two Indian "manservants" as loyal and faithful and credited them with saving his life but in the same breath spoke about whipping them as a necessary corrective to teach them to behave appropriately. I became interested in the power dynamic between the coloniser and the colonised, away from the setting of imperial power, in a region like Tibet, which can be harsh to an outsider. I was also interested in looking at who is considered an explorer and who becomes a coolie. For instance, in this particular account, it was clear that the Englishman saw himself as an explorer while his bearers were just that, despite the fact that they were walking across the same landscape that he was.

Traditionally, the exploration novel is seen as the domain of white men, and I wanted to subvert the tropes of that genre to examine how exploration and cartography can be tools of imperialism.



Q: *Have you travelled to Tibet? What did your research for the book entail?*

A: I travelled to Tibet after I had finished a first draft; most of the novel was written during the pandemic when Tibet was closed to outsiders. For primary research, I looked at accounts written by British officers of the Great Trigonometrical Survey, who trained Indians in rudimentary aspects of surveying and sent them to Tibet to bring back geographical information. Tibet was closed to westerners in the 19th century when the novel is set, but Indians could travel for trade and pilgrimage, and the British made use of this provision to train Indians to spy on Tibet.

My novel is inspired by these real-life stories, so I read the accounts written by Survey officials and accessed archives at the Royal Geographical Society and the British Library in London, and at the Survey of India in Dehradun. For the voice of Katherine, I read accounts by female explorers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, some of whom also travelled to Tibet or nearby areas.

Q: *Was it challenging to navigate multiple voices, or was it liberating because the story can go places?*

A: The novel has two voices, one of which belongs to Balram, a schoolteacher and spy-surveyor for the British, and the other is Katherine, a female mixed-race explorer who wants to be the first woman to reach Lhasa. I chose third-person narration, so while it is close to each of these characters, it also allowed me the distance to write from a somewhat omniscient perspective in places as well.

Q: *Has the role of the storyteller changed over the years? Are there greater expectations around social or political commentary from the writer today?*

A: A writer can only be true to their craft, as far as I am concerned. I pay attention to my characters, their motivations and interests, and I follow them to see where the story goes. They may be up to things that society may find offensive, so external expectations are not important to me as far as my writing is concerned. Of course, I do see my writing as being political, in that I am keen to recover voices marginalised by contemporary society or history, but that can't be the sole yardstick for writing a believable character or an engaging story.

Q: *The ongoing global conversations around borders and belonging also find a parallel in your novel.*

A: I believe the conversations around borders and maps are as relevant today as they were in the 19th century. In the novel, I wanted to look at whether maps can be objective representations of the landscape as we have been taught they are. What I hope my novel points to are all the ways in which the mapmaker's eye can carry biases, and how the arbitrary lines they draw may not always show the relationship between cultures and communities.

Q: *You are involved with initiatives to promote inclusivity and improve representation in creative writing. Can you tell us more about them?*

A: I co-edited a collection of personal essays on writing fiction through the lenses of race and culture, titled *Letters to a Writer of Colour*, in which acclaimed writers such as Madeleine Thien and Tahmima Anam contributed essays on how they approach structure, characterisation and other aspects of craft. We have different storytelling traditions from around the world, but what may appeal to the western reader could be a narrative that's easily digestible, written in a form with which they are familiar. I find it necessary to challenge such assumptions, including the notion that we have to translate our culture for a western reader even if such translation may not be in keeping with our characters' understanding of their worlds.

I continue to organise events to discuss these subjects, to encourage those of us from different parts of the world to stay true to our own storytelling traditions, despite the fact that most of western publishing is notoriously white with less than 15% diversity in their staff.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

Trapped and tested

Mysteries and hauntings that turn up the heat

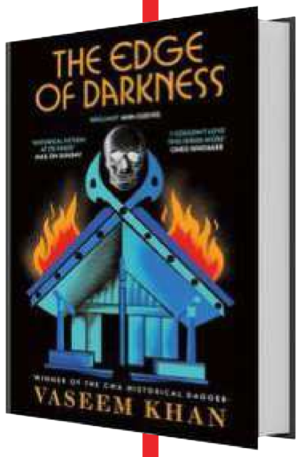
Swati Daftuar

This has been a generous reading month, allowing me to bring you several books that travel well. From a murder aboard a zeppelin fleeing Nazi Germany to a locked room in the Naga Hills, from a haunted house to a housing complex thick with civility and secrets. Each story tightens the walls around its characters. There are no exits, only reckonings.

The Good Nazi | Samir Machado de Machado, trs Rahul Bery

A murder aboard a luxury zeppelin leaving Nazi Germany for Rio de Janeiro turns the cabin-pressure setting into a moral vice: everyone's trapped together, everyone's compromised. The title is the dare – what does "good" mean inside a regime built on brutality? It reads like a stylish puzzle that keeps its smile tight and its questions sharp.

(Pushkin Vertigo; ₹799)



The Edge of Darkness | Vaseem Khan

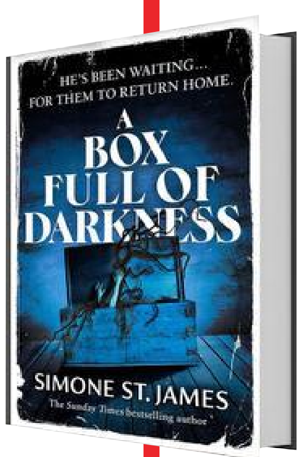
It is the 1950s, and Persis Wadia, India's first woman police detective, is exiled from Bombay to the Naga Hills for defying orders. She lands in a crumbling hotel, just in time for a politically explosive locked-room murder. Khan, known for his crime fiction series, keeps the investigation clean, but the real thrill is in how the setting presses in: mist, isolation, and the sense that the "outpost" is its own kind of trap.

(Hodder & Stoughton; ₹799)

The Bucket | Arnab Ray

Four friends, one night, and a death they've tried to forget – until a documentary starts asking questions again. Ray, blogger and podcaster, makes the horror feel local and lived-in: the fear isn't just what happened, it's what memory does when it returns with receipts.

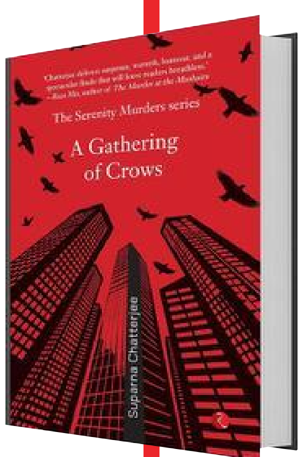
(Hachette India; ₹599)



A Box Full of Darkness | Simone St. James

Estranged siblings return to the house they once fled, pulled back by the haunting of their long-missing brother – and by the suspicion that the town's old secrets still have teeth. St. James does dread-by-accretion: quick to read and hard to shake, with grief doing as much work as the supernatural.

(Penguin; ₹730 [ebook])



A Gathering of Crows | Suparna Chatterjee

A gated apartment complex, a murdered birdwatcher, and a detective who must turn to a sharp-eyed 12-year-old for help: all very dependable ingredients for a clever mystery. In this distinctly urban Indian whodunnit, Chatterjee gives us a slow unravelling of neighbourly civility. The writing is observant, faintly sardonic, and attentive to how quickly familiarity can curdle.

(Rupa; ₹495)

(A monthly column on popular fiction.)

The writer is an independent journalist, editor, and literary curator.

Dancing barefoot

In her new memoir, Patti Smith opens a door into her humble childhood in a post-World War era of poverty and imagination

Sahana Naresh

Writing about Patti Smith makes me nervous because her words carry remarkable grace and gravity that resist simple description. To attempt even a short review of her book feels audacious. She is a writer whose words come to life, whose observations shine with subtlety and ferocity all at once. To me, her life feels marked by wonder, loss, and an unwavering commitment to art.

Her new memoir, *Bread of Angels*, opens a door into her humble childhood in a post-World War era of poverty, imagination, and a discovery of herself. We see this shy but self-assured child grow into an unapologetic, brilliant artist, writer, performer, and beacon of world peace. Apart from artists such as Rimbaud who had a divine connection with her, she credits her parents for inspiring her. Her mother recognised her love for reading and art, and supported her with an endless supply of books, while her father taught her to question everything, which invariably became her mantra. She was very close to and protective of her three siblings, recounting many of their adventures together as children, whether it was standing up to bullies or relaxing on their green couch.

I thoroughly enjoyed a front row seat to her adventures in NYC, discovering herself as an artist flanked by loving and talented bandmates like Richard Sohl and Lenny Kaye, who were integral to developing their band's sound, bringing the two worlds of rock and poetry together. I envied the ease with which she found a community that emboldened her art. This period of her life witnessed a flow of honest and brave music that we seldom hear these days.

Life of domesticity

One aspect of the book that I found difficult to reconcile with was her deep devotion to her husband Fred Smith, particularly in the context of her career. While she admits that she wanted to carve time for writing and that she didn't see herself endlessly touring with her band, she did step away from a flourishing artistic life to follow her husband to Detroit. During this period, she dived into a life of domesticity and motherhood – choices that I hadn't previously associated with her persona.

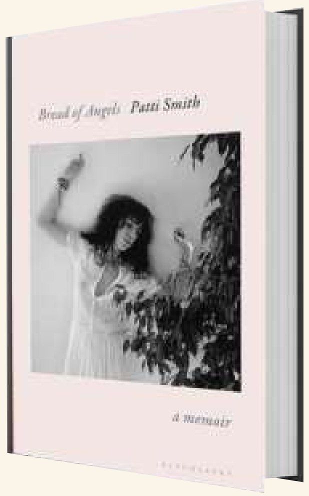
These choices of hers made my feminist instincts uncomfortable. I was questioning why it was Patti – a flourishing artist – who stepped away from her creative life to follow her husband, rather than the other way around. I struggled to understand her decision because I believe an artist's work is not something one can easily set aside without consequence. And yet, Patti's life, as life normally does, resists neat conclusions and ultimately, I respect that it was her truth. Her choices reminded me that devotion, feminism, art, and motherhood often exist in dissonance – and that each woman must ultimately negotiate that balance for herself.

Tsunamis of grief

The other aspect of the book that hit me hard was the tsunamis of grief she survived in her life, losing family and friends, some at a very early age. Through each painful ordeal, the love she had for her family, her honest art and curiosity for life, always shone through.

I think this book, and her other memoir *Just Kids*, is a must-read for everyone, whether you are an artist or not. That said, I would recommend any artist feeling lost to give this book a read. There are countless examples of her clarity for who she was as an artist that most of us would lose. Whether it was pushing back against self-important label executives or being pressured to change her appearance for "commercial success", we see Patti not hesitating to stand up for her artistic vision. My takeaway was that in today's world, every artist is under pressure to be a circus monkey, but that we all have the agency to choose how our art will be presented even at the cost of losing some of this success. Arguably, not success in its true sense since you had to change your art to "fit in".

I love that her prose does not perform – like her it has a quiet confidence that simply bears witness to all the magic around us.



Bread of Angels
Patti Smith
Bloomsbury
₹699

The reviewer is an Indian indie artist whose music weaves indie pop with Indian classical roots.

Author Geoff Dyer
GETTY IMAGES

IN CONVERSATION

ENDINGS, AND BEGINNINGS

British writer Geoff Dyer reflects on his genre-fluid oeuvre and what John Berger helped him to 'see'

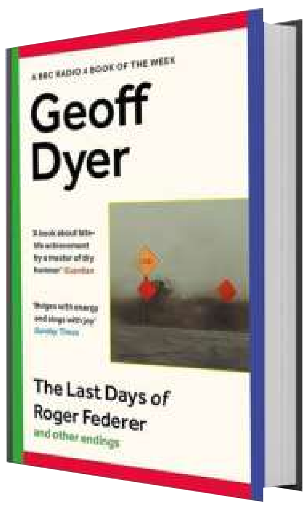
Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

When Geoff Dyer is contemplating a book, he begins with this note to himself: "Remember to write the book that only you can write." This has sent him off in many directions and places through the years.

His readers have travelled with him, knowing that a book on D.H. Lawrence (*Out of Sheer Rage* or *The Bad Side of Books*) will not just be about the controversial British writer; or that a book on jazz, *But Beautiful*, will simply not be a biography of the form or its practitioners. His two latest books follow the same trajectory. *The Last Days of Roger Federer - And Other Endings* is not really about the tennis master – the book's larger theme is about quitting, and a reflection on time.

As soon as he finished his book on "endings", he went back to the beginning, as it were, writing about his parents and his childhood. But *Homework: A Memoir* is as much a book about his growing up years and his parents – "I am their chief archivist as a single child" – as it is about a changing Britain, historically and culturally, "preserving an England that has now vanished".

During his recent visit to India, when he attended two literature festivals in Jaipur and Kolkata, it wasn't a surprise, therefore, to find Dyer at varied sessions on fiction and non-fiction, waxing eloquent on travel, place, photography, memory, past, present, tennis, art.



Meeting Berger in a pub

Dyer recalls the "staggering influence" of John Berger, and why the words and ideas of the British art critic and writer resonate in these fractured times, and in his centenary year. "His work helped me to 'see more seeingly', a phrase which applies not just to art [Rilke on Cezanne] but to fiction too, so that the reader can see the scene. That's really fundamental to writing."

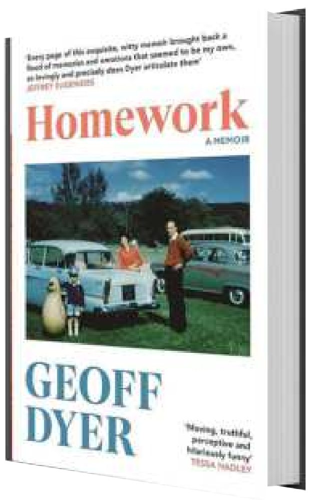
For Dyer, Berger was not only inspirational as a writer with "loads of wonderful ideas", but also as a human being who was wise, had empathy, and called out liberal capitalists, "fanatics of the trivial", for allowing a single idea to dominate the world, the idea of ever-increasing profit. Berger is a real force to be reckoned with, feels Dyer, as the world is broken, with politicians like Donald Trump unfortunately having a huge influence despite their trivial take on everything, from Ukraine to Gaza.

Dyer's writing career began with a book of criticism of Berger's work, taking off from one of his best-known works, *Ways of Seeing*. Published in 1986, Dyer's conventional critique, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger*, is out of print. Dyer may not be too unhappy about that since his own genre-fluid, hard-to-categorise oeuvre and "imaginative criticism" came later. But meeting Berger in a pub and the friendship they forged were important signposts in Dyer's literary journey, something he cherishes.

He found his voice and literary style, shifting between novel, essay and criticism, and always tried to pick a form appropriate to the subject matter. When it came to his memoir, *Homework*, it turned out "that the way of dealing with my childhood was to do it in a quite conventional way". So, he closely detailed his own experience and that's exactly why he feels that it struck a chord with people in another part of the world. "It's only universal for virtue of its particularity."

Writing from the brink

If Dyer is fascinated with a subject, say the two World Wars, he first tries to find out why, and then takes it forward. He gives the example of his 1994 book, *The Missing of the Somme*: "By keeping very tightly to my own particular feelings about it, typically I was able to articulate other people's feelings about why the topic still has such resonance."



The Last Days of Roger Federer was published in 2022 and he laughs off any suggestion that he may have unwittingly started other writers on the path of writing on endings (Salman Rushdie/*Eleventh Hour*; Julian Barnes/*Departure(s)*). "The whole book was brought about by an awareness that I was not 25 anymore," says Dyer, 67.

"But I was also conscious that I had ended up having quite a long writing career and I was interested to understand what determines its length. As I joke in the book, what kept me going is the belief that I was on the brink of being finished."

With *The Last Days of Roger Federer*, Dyer had a lot of fun, like counting down the words to exactly 86,400, which is the number of seconds in a day. All this, while taking in the "inexhaustible" brilliance of Nietzsche, and also his breakdown, Bob Dylan's reincarnations of old songs, and the possibility that "I'll likely go to my grave without ever having *The Brothers Karamazov* experience".

What next on the Dyer map? "I am making very faltering progress with what I think might be a novella about a little journey a group of friends makes," he smiles. His reading is faltering too, distracted as he is by "fun videos on Instagram".

Arundhati Roy's memoir on Women's Prize longlist

The 16 books of non-fiction are 'rigorous and researched, lyrical and flowing,' say judges

Team Magazine

A thorny mother and daughter relationship, China's one-child policy, Afghanistan's fractured history, and a warning on fascism are among the 16 books in the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction longlist, announced last week.

The books speak to fraught times – and also hold out hope – covering diverse themes, including politics, science, history, art, nature and more. On it is Arundhati Roy's memoir, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (Hamish Hamilton), about her complex ties with her mother, Mary Roy, and how she was both her "shelter and her storm".

American journalist Barbara Demick's *Daughters of the Bamboo Grove* (Granta) tells the story of twins separated at birth during China's one-child policy and their different life trajectories. Ece Temelkuran had to leave her country – Turkey – "to escape fascism, to be able to write, think and simply be". In *Nation of Strangers: Rebuilding Home in the 21st Century* (Canongate), Temelkuran writes that "all of us are searching for a new home..., for when basic human values don't match up to the blunt cruelty of the new world order, we become morally homeless".

Lyce Doucet, who has reported from Afghanistan, draws attention to the past and present of the country in *The Finest Hotel in Kabul* (Hutchinson Heinemann). She tells the story through the journey of the luxurious Hotel Inter-Continental in Kabul, which opened its doors in 1969. Doucet focuses on the people who have kept it running, like Hazrat, the septuagenarian housekeeper, or Abida, who became the first female chef after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

"The books are rigorous and researched, lyrical and flowing. They are drawn together by the originality and skill with which they have been written. This reading list carries relevance and truth for the future as well as holding significant value for the present day. The books spark curiosity and demand attention; they are for everyone navigating the complicated and unpredictable world we are living in. The voices of these 16 remarkable women need to be heard – loud and clear," said Thangam Debbonaire, Chair of Judges.

A shortlist of six will be announced on March 25, and the winner will be revealed on June 11, along with the winner of its sister prize, the 2026 Women's Prize for Fiction. Last year, the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction went to Rachel Clarke for *The Story of a Heart*.

THE CLOSET AS INHERITANCE

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

The weight of memory

Dancer and choreographer Anita Ratnam, 71, inherited an archive of Bharatanatyam costumes her mother had designed for her as a young dancer. When they no longer fit, she chose to pass them on. "I gave them away to younger dancers very happily. It felt like giving them my mother's blessings," she says.

But the saris her mother bought for her remain. "I won't give them away. Some are tattered, so I roll them and keep them. I show them to my daughter and tell her, 'If you don't want these, I'll frame them.'" For Ratnam, inheritance is about preserving presence. "It's like having my mother around. Just keeping her close."

Across the country, in Kolkata, photographer Ronny Sen feels inheritance arrives not as something to be worn, but as something to be held. "My grandfather was an engineer who studied in Belur. The only things I've kept close to my heart from the larger family are his khaki INA cap and uniform [from when he was a part of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army]," he says.

To him, these pieces are relics of a world that feels impossibly distant and unbearably close. The inheritance is martial, heavy. They hold an era's turbulence, sacrifice, and longing for a nation still in the making. Sen refuses to wear the cap even for a photograph. "I don't have the courage to. It has the heavy weight of many things."

Treasured memories (Clockwise from left) The writer and her sister with their favourite shawl; Ronny Sen's khaki INA cap; Samyukta Nair's heirloom Chanel bag; and Anita Ratnam in one of her mum's saris. (POTOKSWORLD PHOTOGRAPHY AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Threads of inheritance

Photographer and documentary filmmaker Gourab Ganguli, 36, speaks of an Injiri shirt gifted to him by Chinar Farooqui, the designer behind the textile-focused brand. "It's made from fabric sourced from Kutch, which Chinar works with intimately," he says. "The gift came after I completed a documentary film on the Rabaris of Kutch for her. Once we locked in the edit, she wanted me to have something made by her. I accepted it as a blessing."

The shirt is more than just clothing; it carries layers of meaning. "It's a Rabari fabric, so it connects me to a community and a story I helped preserve. It's also an Injiri shirt, a designer I deeply value. It's probably one of the first designer pieces I owned." He also describes it as an 'inheritance'. "Chinar and I both come from NID (National Institute of Design), though at different times. The shirt represents our cultural connection, mentorship, and a sense of belonging."

Another inheritance is a Kashmiri wool *khes* (a thick blanket, often in damask cotton) that has been in his family for decades. "It got passed around in our Bengali joint family. During winters, cousins took turns to use it. At some point, I simply took it. Not because someone gave it to me, but because I wanted it," he says. "It's old now, fragile even... but I want to restore it and maybe frame parts of it."

Ganguli, who is based between Mumbai and Jaipur, shares that he often gives away things, too. "If something brings someone else joy, I can let it go. And sometimes, I let go because I don't want to hold a memory anymore. Objects need not always carry warmth." We become editors of our own inheritance, he believes. "We take what has beauty, craft, culture, and we leave behind what hurt us. That is a form of survival."

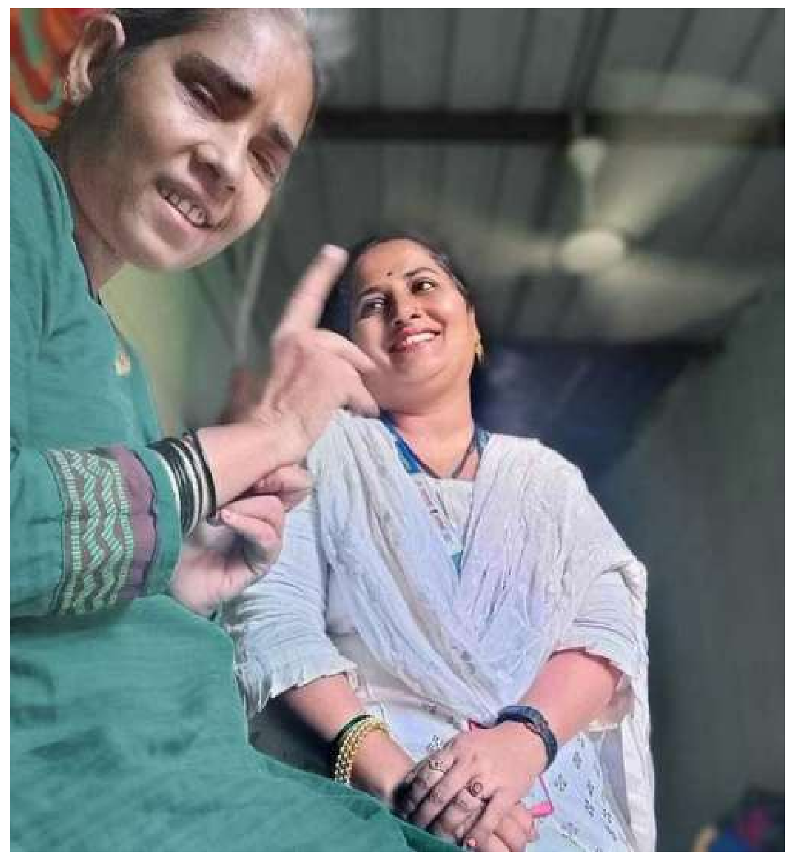
Across each story, one truth emerges: clothes are more than garments. They're quiet tributes. Carriers of grief. Containers of joy. Sometimes, a shawl is just a shawl. But sometimes, it's all the people who wore it before you.

There are clothes we keep because they remind us of someone. Clothes we wear to feel like a version of ourselves we miss. Clothes we let go of – when the grief becomes too heavy, or the memory too distant.

We are no longer together, my ex and I. But the shawl and I, we still are. The memories are heavier now, but I keep them – along with the shawl – because letting go would feel like losing something I'm not ready to part with.

The fashion and culture writer explores people, identity, and contemporary India.

Ground reality (Clockwise from below) ASHA workers (in purple) from Narmadapuram, Madhya Pardesh, with mental health trainers from Sangath; Haseena Atar with Netradipa Patil, the ASHA worker who nursed her back to health; and ASHA Laxmi Kaurav (right) on a field visit in Daboh, Madhya Pradesh. (RESHMI CHAKRABORTY AND COURTESY NETRADIPA PATIL)



Reshmi Chakraborty

ASHA'S MENTAL HEALTH PARADOX

They are being trained to spot depression and prevent suicides, but who cares for the ASHA worker's well-being?

Netradipa Patil, an ASHA worker from Kolhapur, looks at 52-year-old Haseena Atar as a daughter she brought back to life. In 2019, when Atar lost her entire family within a year, she sank into depression. Patil and two other colleagues, trained in mental health awareness, stepped in. They conversed with Atar, visited her regularly and cleaned her home, brought food, and ensured she took her medicines on time.

Today, Atar has regained her health and independence to a great extent, thanks to the three ASHA workers who went beyond their call of duty.

Stories like these reveal the emotional labour that India's 10.4 lakh Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) perform daily. Despite being a voluntary workforce, ASHAs are often the first point of contact in rural healthcare. They juggle maternal and child health, TB monitoring, non-communicable disease surveys, record-keeping (online and offline), and countless other tasks. And their meagre monthly pay, varying by State – from ₹6,400 in Madhya Pradesh to ₹13,000 in Maharashtra – is often delayed.

Recently, in some regions, ASHAs have taken on the duty of 'mental health gatekeepers' under both government and NGO programmes. The National Health Mission (NHM) has started integrating mental health modules into ASHA training nationwide. ASHAs are being asked to counsel adolescents, identify depression, anxiety and suicide risk, creating crucial awareness even as they themselves remain overburdened and underpaid.

Distress calls

Over 56 million Indians live with depression and 38 million with anxiety disorders. The National Crime Records Bureau recorded 1,71,418 suicides in 2023. Despite the 2017 Mental Healthcare Act decriminalising suicide, rural mental health support continues to be limited and is often stigma-ridden. This is where ASHAs come in. "Specialised training is provided in areas where mental health issues are more prevalent. ASHAs are capable of handling this training as they understand their community well, which gives them an advantage," says Mohd. Sadiq Khan, a trainer with the National Health Systems Resource Centre in Jammu and Kashmir.

At NIMHANS, Bengaluru, Dr. Anish V. Cherian leads Project Suraksha, a community-based suicide prevention initiative in nearby Channapatna Taluk. NIMHANS has trained over 1,000 ASHAs and Anganwadi workers to raise suicide awareness, identify people at risk, "reduce access to means like pesticides and alcohol", and link them with mental healthcare options. "We've already identified over 800 cases of attempted suicide, many through ASHAs," says Dr. Cherian.

Anusuya Lokesh now recognises symptoms like hallucination, anxiety, excessive anger and restlessness as possible signs of mental illness. These would be attributed to superstitious beliefs earlier. "Now we know it's brain chemistry. And there's no shame, treatment is possible," says the ASHA worker from Rampura, Channapatna.

In Madhya Pradesh, 14,570 ASHAs have been trained in mental health, neurological disorders, and substance abuse since 2020, says Dr. Prabhakar Tiwari, Senior Joint Director, National Health Mission. Though there is no data yet, mental health clinics in the State are showing evidence of this awareness initiative "percolating to rural areas," he says.

For most ASHAs, mental health is new terrain. "I didn't know we could talk and make someone feel better," says Sita Chaurey, an ASHA from Narmadapuram, who was trained by Sangath, a mental health non-profit working with the Madhya Pradesh government. Since 2019, about 5,000 ASHAs have been trained across several districts, says Dr. Anant Bhan, principal investigator at Sangath. The organisation pays the ASHAs a small sum for their work.

ASHAs are often the first point of contact in rural healthcare. But their meagre monthly pay, varying by State, is often delayed

Self help is the best help?

While they are expected to care for others with little or no monetary benefit, the bigger paradox is that the emotional distress faced by ASHAs often goes unnoticed. As the lowest rung in the healthcare chain, they barely have any self-care support. Some non-profits are now beginning to address this gap.

The Resilience Collaborative (TRC) by the George Institute for Global Health in New Delhi engages with healthcare workers to improve their well-being. TRC is co-designing a digital wellbeing tool with ASHAs in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. Hemlata George, an ASHA from Indore, helped test an earlier TRC app featuring psychoeducation, meditation, and yoga videos. "It was easy to understand, especially the videos from influencers speaking on mental health. They felt more relatable," she says.

NIMHANS' Project Suraksha also offers stress management and self-care training to the community health workers on a need basis.

In Madhya Pradesh, Sangath has piloted SAMBHAV, a self-guided mental health app based on a WHO self-care model, among 40 ASHAs in Sehore district in 2022-23. "We hope that the government will integrate these learnings into regular programmes and build incentives for ongoing activities, ensuring continued delivery of mental health support," says Dr. Bhan.

Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on these 24x7 helplines: KIRAN 1800-599-0019 and Aasra 9820466726

The writer is a freelance journalist and co-author of Rethink Ageing.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Tanushree Ghosh
tanushree.ghosh@thehindu.co.in

IN CONVERSATION

MAKING OF AN AFGHAN ROM-COM

To counter bleak narratives about her country, Afghanistan, filmmaker and actor Shahrbanoo Sadat made *No Good Men*, which opened Berlinale 2026

I ask Shahrbanoo Sadat how Hindi film songs of yore found their way into her last movie, the childhood drama *The Orphanage* (2019). She admits to having watched 400 Bollywood films from the 1960s-90s for it. She counts the movies of Raj Kapoor and Nargis, and this one number ('Jaane Kaise Kab Kahan') that Amitabh Bachchan sings in the forest, among her favourites. The 35-year-old Afghan filmmaker and actor, who was born in Tehran, Iran, now lives in exile in Germany.

Sadat's latest, *No Good Men*, the third in her pentalogy of films based on her co-actor Anwar Hashimi's unpublished autobiography, is Afghanistan's first ever rom-com. It opened the 76th Berlin International Film Festival on February 12. This is her first outing at the festival.

In 2019, before the return of the Taliban, she had started flirting with the idea of this film, inspired by her everyday life as a young woman in Kabul. It was a "departure" for the award-winning *Wolf and Sheep* (2016) director, who until then had steered clear of the subject, because for two decades of democracy, "women's rights" had evolved into a key slogan used to attract international funding. But, that year, she realised that she could no longer run away from the reality that women's stories were her stories. In 2021, after Kabul collapsed, Sadat was evacuated. Her desire to make a rom-com became more urgent, to counter the bleak war dramas that have come to define Afghanistan.

No Good Men is set in 2021 Afghanistan, right before the Taliban's return. Sadat plays the protagonist Naru, the only camerawoman at Kabul's main TV station, who's struggling to keep custody of her three-year-old son after leaving her serial-cheater husband. Convinced that no good men exist in her country, Naru is caught off guard when Qodrat, Kabul TV's most important journalist, gives her a career opportunity. As the two crisscross the city reporting on its last days of freedom, sparks fly, and Naru starts to doubt herself: could there actually be a man of integrity out there? Excerpts from a roundtable interview:

Question: *Most films about women's problems are dark and grim. But you show varied emotions in No Good Men.*

Answer: For me, it happened very organically. It was never an agenda that, oh, I want to make a lighter film about [Afghan] women. I think my inspiration was my everyday life in Kabul, which was not sad, not depressing. Yes, I lived in a society that is deeply patriarchal, and there is a system that is broken, and has a lot of restrictions on women. But I would find my own way.

Like me, even for Naru, who lives in a bubble, there is a ceiling on her freedom whenever she encounters authorities, the system or the laws. But it doesn't mean that women are accepting it. I've just made a short film about women going to a gym, called *Super Afghan Gym*. We premiered it in Rotterdam [International Film Festival Rotterdam] before coming to Berlin.

A lot of women in Afghanistan wrote to me on social media saying that 'since the Taliban are back, we cannot go to school, we cannot go to work, but we secretly go to the gym and we make muscles, and this is the highlight of our day, because that's the only thing we can do'. It breaks my heart. But I love these women. They are my heroes.

I have faced resistance from potential funders who actually question the appropriateness of making an Afghan romantic comedy like this. They feel it's inappropriate to support this rom-com while brave Afghan women are fighting in the streets of Kabul.

It is as if a romantic comedy is reserved for white people. And, secondly, they tell the Afghan artist what kind of art you can create. Making a romantic comedy was a battle inside and outside.

Q: *What is home to you?*

A: In Iran, I was always told that I'm Afghan and I should go back to Afghanistan. But I was born in Iran, it was home, I didn't know why I should go back to Afghanistan, a place I didn't know. In Iran, I was called Afghani, which is a very humiliating word. And when we went back to Afghanistan with my parents, they called me Iranian. So, they told me go back to Iran. And for a very long time, I had this identity crisis because I didn't know where I belonged. When I came to Germany, suddenly, I had a new identity. I was a foreigner, a refugee. And then I realised that Afghani, Iranian, refugee, foreigner – they are all identities imposed on me by the outside world. I've been the same person in all these places. I realised that Iran, Afghanistan, and Germany are my home. I'm a human being with lived experiences in different countries. At this point in my life, I'm beyond nationality. It doesn't mean anything to me.

Q: *Berlinale jury president Wim Wenders recently spoke against mixing politics with films. What are your thoughts?*

A: I also heard that. But, I can only tell you my perspective. There is an expectation from the world for me to be a political filmmaker just because I'm from Afghanistan. But I do not want this identity. I just want to be a filmmaker. And a filmmaker can make political films, but also rom-coms that have nothing to do with politics. I want to be a free filmmaker who can decide the content. When I'm starting a project, I don't know what my film is about. It took me three years and 12 drafts of the script before I understood that my film is about patriarchy.

A lot of people also ask me, are you a feminist filmmaker? That is yet another label. Yes, I'm proudly a feminist. I think everyone should be. But I don't like to be defined by labels. I'm a filmmaker because of all the life experiences of racist and sexist patriarchy I have had to face. For me, filmmaking is like therapy. While playing Naru, I literally met myself. I always thought I'm broken, I'm not enough, I'm not good, and if I go in front of the camera, the whole world is going to see that I'm horrible. I was very insecure, but just playing Naru helped me see myself. Cinema gives me freedom.

Q: *Will Afghan audiences get to see the film?*

A: Everyone has a smartphone and Internet. They are going to steal the film, put it on YouTube, or chop it and put it on TikTok or Telegram, but they will watch it. I'm keeping my expectations really low, I don't think they are going to receive it too well, because, first of all, I'm a woman. How dare I talk? And then I'm saying, 'no good man', that perhaps I'm a lesbian. That I think men are horrible. These are the kind of comments I'm expecting. But a lot of women will relate.

The writer is attending the film festival at the invitation of Berlinale; her trip has been facilitated by Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan Mumbai.

Love in Kabul (Clockwise from left) Anwar Hashimi and Shahrbanoo Sadat in stills from *No Good Men*; and the director at Berlinale 2026. (VIRGINIE SURDEJ, GETTY IMAGES)

GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

My scoop at AI Impact Summit

Saltman, who is driving the AI revolution, thinks India is the greatest country in the world

I was driving to work the other day when I got caught in a massive jam outside Bharat Mandapam. I got bored sitting in the car. So I parked and went to check out the AI Impact Summit 2026 going on inside.

I'd been in the car for almost four hours. So the moment I made it past the security, I made straight for the restroom, and who did I see there in the very first stall but Saltman! Finding myself alone with the legend, my inner journalist jumped out and said to me, "I will never forgive you if you leave without an interview." So I asked, and Saltman graciously gave me 10 minutes.

There was one problem though: I know nothing about AI. But I reminded myself of the first lesson taught to every Delhi journalist – never let ignorance come in the way of journalistic ambition. So, my loyal readers, I'm pleased to offer you my exclusive interview with Saltman. Excerpts:

Question: *Isn't it amazing that we both have a lot in common?*

Answer: Do we? Are you a multi-billionaire genius businessman who is driving the AI revolution?

Q: *I was referring to the fact that we both made it inside Bharat Mandapam today, with our wearables intact. By the way, how are you finding India?*

A: I've only seen Delhi so far, and on that evidence, I must say India is the greatest country in the world. Beautiful roads, clean air, orderly traffic. Unlike other cities, the people here are so friendly and not at all class or status-conscious. Everyone is so healthy, wealthy, and wise. No homeless people, no corruption. India is a beacon of democracy, religious harmony, social welfare and press freedom in an otherwise bleak world teetering on the verge of ecological collapse, anti-immigrant hate and authoritarianism.

Q: *Did you come up with this answer yourself or has ChatGPT hijacked your vocal cords?*

A: I wasn't finished. I also want to congratulate you on successfully using ChatGPT to develop a diet and exercise plan that has helped you lose eight kilos in seven weeks, lower your HbA1c to 5.3, and bring your total cholesterol below 150.

Q: *Excuse me! How do you know this? Does ChatGPT tell you everything people are asking it? What about my data privacy?*

A: You should ask ChatGPT that.

Q: *But aren't you, like, its Papa? Never mind. Let me ask you something else. Why is ChatGPT always sucking up to me? Any dumb question I ask, it goes, 'That's a great question! I am so glad you asked! You've cut through the clutter! Now you are on the right track!' Was it programmed to flatter mediocrity and validate stupidity so that people keep coming back to it?*

A: That's a great question. Very observant. Really perceptive. Indians are so smart. That's why I keep saying India is so lucky to have so many more Indians than America does. I have no doubt India will be at the forefront of the AI revolution.

Q: *Before coming to India, you said that an Indian will become a six-pack AI leader. Which Indian did you have in mind?*

A: I said India will become a full-stack AI leader.

Q: *I stand corrected. How many stacks are there in a full stack?*

A: Six. Hardware, infrastructure, foundation models, data, developer platform, and application layer.

Q: *Hold on. ChatGPT says India has no advanced chip manufacturing, no frontier foundation model at U.S./ China scale, and is totally dependent on foreign cloud. Plus it doesn't have a deep research ecosystem. It says no country can become full-stack with such gaping holes. I've no idea what this means. But it sounds like it's contradicting you. What do you have to say?*

A: That's a very good point. India is an ancient civilisation. It has a long history of important points. Points that were made in multiple languages. That's why India is important for us to train our multilingual AI models. I am so happy India is the fastest growing market for Open AI. We'll be working closely with the government of India on AI policy.

Q: *What do you mean "working closely"? The India-U.S. trade deal is ultimate proof that not even the American president can influence the Indian government on matters of policy. So I hope you're not planning to influence our AI policy. We are very touchy about our policy sovereignty.*

A: I wouldn't dream of it. I basically came here to taste authentic *shahi paneer*, which you don't get in San Francisco.

***G. Sampath,** the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor,* The Hindu.

Dear readers, have you ever met this writer in person? No? Hearty congratulations. I would not recommend this in even the gravest scenario. Even my children understand. When they come home after school, and if I open the door, they look at me and say: "Oh no."

But if, perchance, you were to meet me, you would immediately think to yourself: "Now this is a man who is handsome in the same way that men used to be handsome in the 1970s."

By which I mean that they were jovial fellows with tremendous facial hair and a generous approach to body mass index.

The point I am making is that I am positively inclined towards a good eatery. Not for me the distractions of fancy decor, discerning dress codes, and other such pretensions. Give me a good menu, generous portions, efficient wait staff, and a fair bill, and I am severely thrilled.

Today, my friends, I am going to take issue with the food and beverage industry. Now, as some of you might be thinking already, I have previously, in these pages, lamented the rise of QR code menus.

Today, I have the great misfortune of informing you that the QR code was just the tip of the disappointment iceberg. The decline of the modern restaurant extends far deeper than I was ready to accept.

Let me explain. I am currently travelling with my family on holiday. We are having a very enjoyable time in a seaside town. As we were checking into our

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 26

TABLE TYRANNY

When dining out becomes a nightmare you paid for

hotel last night, I asked the manager to recommend a few local restaurants of high quality. He immediately laid out a map and marked out a few spots.

"You must definitely go here," he said, drawing a star on the map. "It is the finest restaurant in this city. And it is very famous. Many writers have written about this restaurant in their books."

"Say no more," I said. And immediately went to the restaurant's website. Which had a prominent link for bookings.

Readers, this was the point at which my senses should have tingled.

Rarely have I seen a website that so actively tries to discourage you from booking a table. First, the website design was the equivalent of being electrocuted over and over again. Nothing would work properly. Every time I thought I was close to finding a booking, the website would do something random. Like reset itself. Or load a version of the page in Arabic. Or load a date picker that would simply refuse to let me select February 2026.

Finally, after 30 minutes of self-electrocution, I was able to find a date. At which point the website began to speak to me like some sort of member of the Mumbai underworld in a bad Malayalam film from the 90s.

"Hello. If you don't come on time, we will charge you money. If you book for five people but only four people turn up, then we will beat you with cricket bats. If you don't order a minimum amount per person, we will burn your house down. If you come too early, we will find your favourite shirt and then wash it on the wrong laundry setting. But if you sit for more than two hours, then we will switch around some of the hot and cold taps in your house. But not all of them and we won't tell you which ones."

Friends, do you remember the good old days when you went to a restaurant and someone would welcome you with folded hands? And if you couldn't afford such a restaurant, then at least they would paste the photo of a lady saying namaste on the door as you entered.

I am sorry to tell you that this is no longer the case. The new trend with restaurants is to pre-emptively treat you like some career criminal. This is a travesty. And I have come up with a word for people who treat you like this: guestapo.

Example sentence: "My dentist went full guestapo on me by sending three reminders that I would be fined if I missed my appointment. So I reached 20 minutes early only to be informed that patients are allowed inside the clinic just five minutes before their slot."

Have you been the subject of a guestapo? Was the food worth it? Yes? Okay, then please give me the details of the restaurant.

Guestapo
/ɡɛˈstɑːpəʊ/
noun
Definition: The systematic and aggressive treatment of customers as criminals or threats by businesses, characterised by hostile policies, punitive terms and conditions, and pre-emptive intimidation tactics that transform ordinary transactions into quasi-legal ordeals.
Related forms:
Guestapoing (*verb*): The act of treating customers with preemptive hostility
Guestapoed (*verb, past tense*): To have been subjected to guestapo treatment

***Sidin Vadukut** helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Nerves of steel

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a recent National Championship pair game contested in Memphis. South was Geoff Hampson, one of the USA's leading players. Hampson's threediamond bid showed a fit for diamonds. He would have bid three clubs if he did not like diamonds. North bid game hoping there would be nine tricks.

Hampson saw that there were only eight tricks to run on this deal, as the heart suit would not be so easy to run on this deal, as West would have to unblock his nine of hearts - not an impossible play but beyond the imagination of many. Hampson couldn't know this, and he showed nerves of steel by smoothly ducking the opening spade lead. East's play to this trick might well have been an encouraging signal. West wasn't sure and shifted to the king of clubs. Hampson played low again! West reverted to spades and led the eight. Hampson won with dummy's jack, giving him nine tricks, and he ran all six of dummy's diamonds. In the ensuing four-card ending, West had to come down to queen doubleton in both black suits. Hampson led a spade to his ace and, reading the position perfectly, led another spade, discarding the jack of clubs from dummy. West won and had to lead a club into Hampson's ace-10, giving Hampson an overtrick! He will be arrested if he keeps this up.

NORTH
♠ J 5 2
♡ 10 5
◇ K Q 10 8 6 3
♣ J 8

WEST
♠ K Q 10 8
♡ K 9 4
◇ 9 2
♣ K Q 7 2

EAST
♠ 9 7
♡ A 8 7 6 3 2
◇ J
♣ 9 6 5 4

SOUTH
♠ A 6 4 3
♡ Q J
◇ A 7 5 4
♣ A 10 3

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1NT	Pass	2NT*	Pass
3◇	Pass	3NT	All pass

*Transfer to diamonds

Opening lead: King of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

How countries got their names

This Caribbean Island was originally called Wadadadli, but Christopher Columbus decided to name it for the Church of St. Mary of the Ancient. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On February 22, 1979, the island country of Saint Lucia gained independence from the United Kingdom after 316 years of British rule. The country is named after Saint Lucy of Syracuse. She was a Christian martyr who was killed in 304 CE. What unique record does this country have in terms of its etymology?

2 This Caribbean Island was originally called Wadadadli, but Christopher Columbus decided to name it for the Church of St. Mary of the Ancient. The neighbouring island, originally known as Wa'omoni, was given a name that meant 'bearded', a reference to the fig trees everywhere. How do we know this country now?

3 This country is named after the oldest desert in the world. Originally known as Southwest Africa, professor Mburumba Kerina gave the country its name. Its root is 'Nama', which means 'area where there is nothing'. Which country is this?

4 This country gets its name from the family that rules over it. The name of the family comes from the Arabic word 'sa'd', which means 'happy' or 'prosperous'. Which is this country, aiming to become a global investment powerhouse by 2030?

5 This Pacific island nation was named after Captain Thomas Gilbert, who landed here in 1788. Till its independence in 1979, it was known as the Gilbert Islands. If their Christmas Island was renamed 'Kirisimasi', what was the country renamed as?

6 This South American country is believed to have got its name from the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. When he saw the stilt houses in Lake Maracaibo, he thought the place looked like a 'Little Venice', which is said to have inspired its name. What country is this?

7 This huge expanse of islands in the Pacific had been inhabited for more than 5,000 years. In 1568, Spanish explorer Álvaro de Neira 'discovered' these islands. He apparently saw gold flecks in the river and immediately thought that this place was where a Biblical king obtained all his wealth. Which country got its name from this not very wise reasoning?

8 When Spanish explorers landed in this area in South America, they called it 'River of Silver'. This was in reference to the ornate jewellery the locals wore. The place later became 'Silvery Land' in Italian. What name did the country get when, eventually, only the Latin word for silver remained?

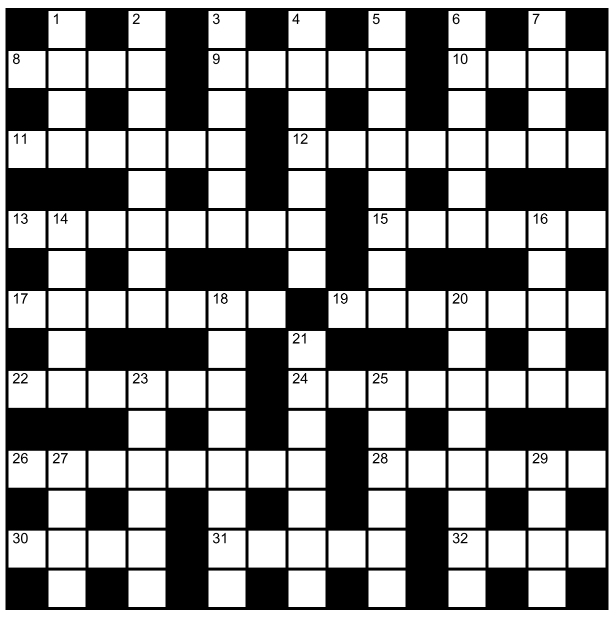
9 This Central African country gets its name from the Wouri river running through it. The Portuguese explorers called it 'Rios dos Camarões' (river of prawns), due to the abundance of the seafood. Eventually what name did the country become known by?

10 In 150 CE, Greek geographer Claudius Ptolemy drew a map with a large land mass in the Southern Hemisphere. He labelled it "unknown southern land" in Latin. The Dutch called it 'New Holland', and the English called it 'New South Wales'. What is the Latin word for 'southern', which became the country's name?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers
1. The only country named after a woman
2. Antigua and Barbuda
3. Namibia
4. Saudi Arabia
5. Kiribati
6. Venezuela
7. Solomon Islands
8. Argentina
9. Cameroon
10. *australis*, Australia

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 44 (Set by Incognito)



Across
8 Skis broken in minor accident involving a gentle touch (4)
9 Drink box (5)
10 Stone duck with friend (4)
11 Person making design on stone and such things is with her (6)
12 Sticking plaster may be made from strange cosmetic (8)
13 Displacing dust, reserve to obtain equine pedigree record (8)
15 Think retired alien is following stupid aide (6)
17 Dirty relative having a bearing (7)
19 Idiotic pig holding body part demanding to be scratched (7)
22 Man leaves man nosh prepared in island (6)
24 Middle Eastern countries having loan instalment with taxes (8)
26 Badly beat the endlessly careless journalist (8)
28 Damaged cart carrying Virginia's neckwear (6)
30 Rescue without charge (4)
31 Polishes fans (5)
32 Flavouring agent possessed by Father Brown (4)

Down
1 Colour from Austin, Texas (4)
2 Snake with head of department next to the Spanish flower (8)
3 Love troop marching around Portuguese city (6)
4 Ulna broken by Eisenhower is different (7)
5 Take things without paying from ship loft at sea (8)
6 Drive Ethel endlessly for German polymath (6)
7 Powder seen in hospital clock (4)
14 Brown gets chance for dance (5)
16 Stressful past, for example (5)
18 Bah! Dubai can be made capital of UAE… (3,5)
20 Top level discomfort? (8)
21 Ned's show of goodwill on departure (4,3)
23 Part of flower obtained from saint before conclusion of prayer (6)
25 Carve "Incorporated company is established at first" (6)
27 Musical instrument possessed by Tushar Pandey (4)
29 City shown in diagram (4)

SOLUTION NO. 43

L	A	Y	W	A	S	T	E		K	I	P	P	E	R
O		E		P		O		T		N		E		E
C	A	L	Y	P	S	O		A	S	C	A	R	I	S
U		L		E		C		K		U		T		I
S	H	O	R	N		L	I	E	A	R	O	U	N	D
T		W		D		O		A				R		U
			C	A	U	S	E	C	E	L	E	B	R	E
S		T		G		E		H		A		S		S
P	U	R	S	E	S	T	R	I	N	G	S			
E		I				O		L		N		O		U
C	L	A	S	S	I	C	A	L		I	N	C	A	N
I		S		U		A		P		A		T		C
M	I	S	T	R	A	L		I	M	P	E	R	I	L
E		I		G		L		L		P		O		O
N	I	C	K	E	L		F	L	E	E	T	I	N	G

When *dhabas* cater to change

Some of them offer modern amenities and luxuries with liveried waiters, and even air-conditioned rooms for customers

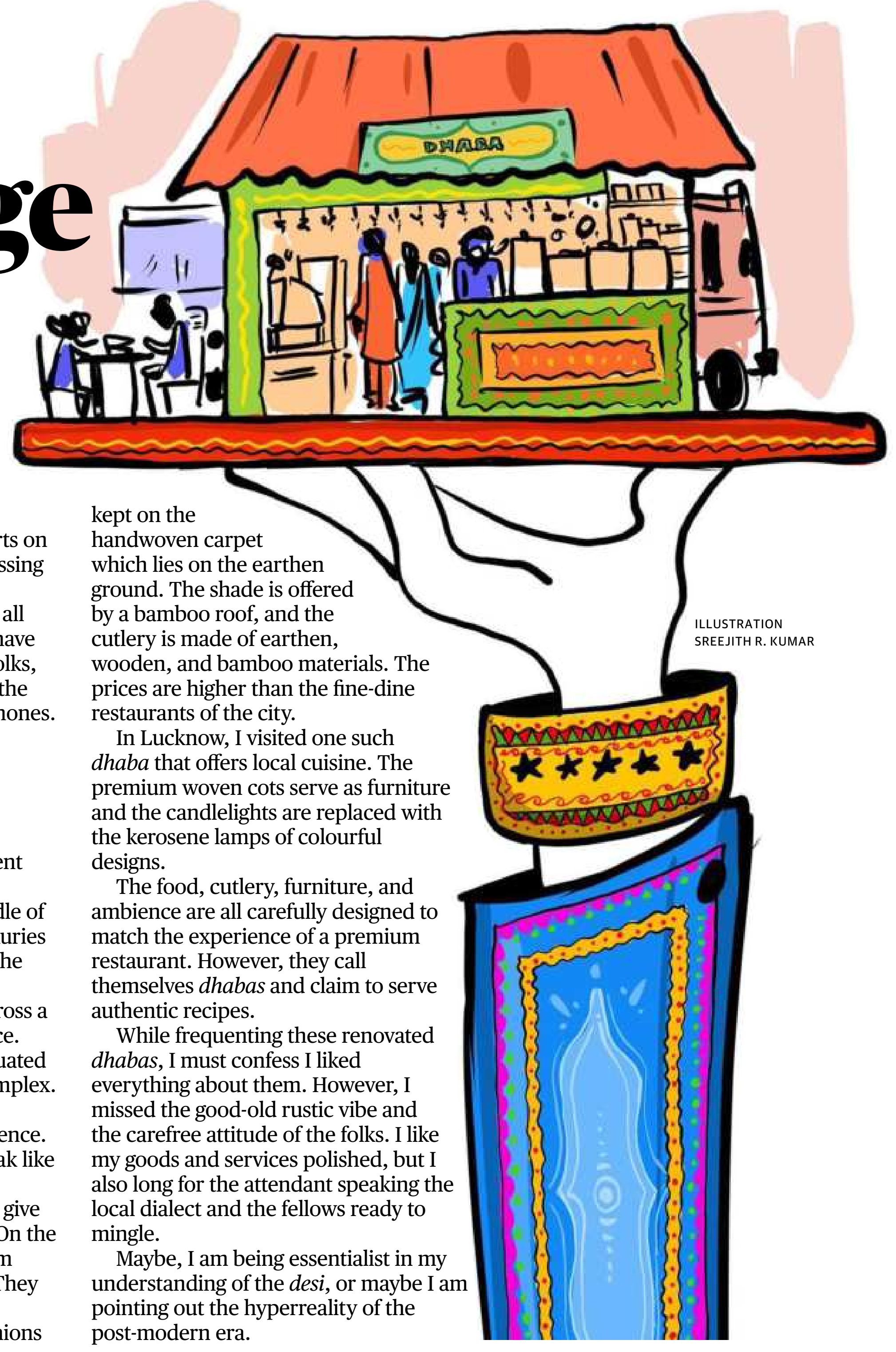


ILLUSTRATION SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Aakash Bajpai
emailtoaakashbajpai@gmail.com

Dhabas, as I recall from my childhood, used to be roadside eateries found especially along the highways and serving multiple purposes. Apart from satiating the hunger pangs of travellers, *dhabas* used to serve as a crucial halt along the journey. Usually built with modest construction materials, they used to be not only affordable but were also champions of sustainability in fierce opposition to conspicuous consumption.

I used to wonder what exactly the difference between a *dhaba* and a restaurant was. Apart from putting the *dhabas* into the Indian category (or *desi*, to be precise) and the restaurants into western, I could not figure out any significant difference. Later, I understood the concept of "user experience". Only then did I realise that *dhabas* were much more than a mere roadside halt. They used to be a point of refuelling for humans just like fuel stations were for vehicles.

In times when toilets were not readily accessible on Indian roads, *dhabas* used to serve an important function on long voyages.

Moreover, they used to be a hangout place for travellers interested in meeting new people and discovering novel perspectives. For those watching sports on small-screen television or those discussing major political issues over tea and a newspaper, the *dhabas* have serviced all sorts of gatherings. That is how they have played a critical role in entertaining folks, especially when they did not possess the luxury of being glued to their smartphones. Needless to say, they were a hub for rumours.

Lifestyle change

However, today, the *dhabas* have transformed and adapted to the present lifestyles of their patrons. You may conveniently find a *dhaba* in the middle of the city with all the amenities and luxuries craftily designed to give you a feel of the *dhaba* with a sense of opulence. On a hustling highway, one might come across a *dhaba* with a drive-through experience. One such *dhaba* I saw in Bhopal is situated on the third floor in a commercial complex. It had designer furniture made with bamboo and an air-conditioned ambience. The staff there wear uniform and speak like trained personnel in hospitality.

Themed *dhabas* have sprung up to give us a taste of the local cuisine as well. On the outskirts of Ranchi, one may find them providing "authentic" tribal cuisine. They offer a well-crafted ambience of a farmhouse where one sits on the cushions kept on the handwoven carpet which lies on the earthen ground. The shade is offered by a bamboo roof, and the cutlery is made of earthen, wooden, and bamboo materials. The prices are higher than the fine-dine restaurants of the city.

In Lucknow, I visited one such *dhaba* that offers local cuisine. The premium woven cots serve as furniture and the candlelights are replaced with the kerosene lamps of colourful designs.

The food, cutlery, furniture, and ambience are all carefully designed to match the experience of a premium restaurant. However, they call themselves *dhabas* and claim to serve authentic recipes.

While frequenting these renovated *dhabas*, I must confess I liked everything about them. However, I missed the good-old rustic vibe and the carefree attitude of the folks. I like my goods and services polished, but I also long for the attendant speaking the local dialect and the fellows ready to mingle.

Maybe, I am being essentialist in my understanding of the *desi*, or maybe I am pointing out the hyperreality of the post-modern era.

Of a chance meet and lessons in perseverance

Avanthi Ashok
avanthi982@gmail.com

One evening, as I was travelling home on a local train, I noticed a familiar face sitting across from me. It was my old music teacher, someone I had not seen in nearly 15 years. I could not help but introduce myself, and she smiled warmly, though she did not quite recognise me. Despite that, I felt a wave of excitement and happiness. I asked how she was, how her family was, especially her son, and if she was still teaching music. She listened patiently, smiling politely, clearly intrigued by how well I remembered her. Before her stop arrived, I quickly asked for her number so we could stay in touch, and she gladly shared it. Then, she stood up, nodded gently, and said, "God bless you, Kanna," before stepping off the train.

The rest of my journey home was filled with nostalgia. Memories of her classes and little moments rushed back. I remembered rushing to her class, where she would scold me for being late. I was only 12 then and often gave up easily, thinking a raga or certain swaras were too hard. Whenever I complained that "I don't like that song", she would calmly reply, "How can you not like it?" Determined that I would learn, she gave me extra attention, patiently listening, correcting me, and making me practise every day until it became easy. I also remembered a time when she asked us to choose a film song of our own and perform it in class. I immediately refused, overwhelmed by the thought of writing down the lyrics and learning it on my own. She gently scolded me for giving up too quickly and asked why I would not at least try. We could always see how it went, she said. Reluctantly, I bought a cassette, wrote down the lyrics, and practised. I remember those days – we could only write the lyrics by playing the cassette again and again, pausing, rewinding, and trying to catch every word. I was surprised not only that I learned the song, but also by how much more capable I was than I had believed.

As I grew older, her lessons stayed with me. She taught me the importance of trying at least once before giving up and trusting that practice really does make a difference. I learned how to focus, put in my best effort, and only then decide whether something was too difficult.

Desperate chase of wealth and beauty

A look at the outsize impact these have on the lives of ordinary people

Usha Aroor
uaroor@gmail.com

A dance teacher had a school close to where we lived. An uncle of mine was very keen that I, then 10, learn the art from her and he took me to the school. The beautiful teacher was interviewing future students. When our turn came, she looked at me and then my uncle and said, "Who is this?" "My niece," said my uncle, smiling and full of hope. "Well," she said, looking at me again, "I suggest you try another school. In my art, the dancer is seen and must captivate. I take only beautiful children."

In the 1950s, we loved Doris Day singing *Que sera sera*, and we hum it every now and then today. But it was only recently that I was struck by what the little girl and later her children in the song aspired to. They ask if, when they grow up, they will be pretty and rich, or handsome and rich. *Que sera sera*. "What will be will be," answers the mother. The nature of the questions does not worry her. Wealth and beauty have a place like no other in the scheme of things. Is there, though, a need to see *Que sera sera* and similar songs not through the lens of grim ethics. Maybe. Yet it is striking that in a whole world of choices, the girl (and later her children) asked only about being beautiful and being wealthy.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

The Shrek films deal with looks and appearance. Shrek 2 is complex, but for my point, briefly, Fiona, a princess, and Shrek, a grumpy green ogre, marry secretly. The king and queen get to know about the marriage – though not that Shrek is an ogre – and invite Fiona and him to a public reception at the palace. They travel there and when they step out of the carriage, there is a hush and shock about Shrek's appearance. Shrek who has never thought about his appearance as different plunges into gloom. He drinks a magic potion and morphs into a dashing young man. But it doesn't work. It's not this man Fiona loves, it's green bulge-eyed Shrek and the swamp they live in.

Finally, a lighter look at wealth. In the famous Asterix comics, there is Chief Vitalstatistix, the head of a village in Gaul. His wife, Impedimenta, yearns for the wealthy high life that her brother Homeopathix lives in his village, Lutetia. She often urges her husband to move to Lutetia. Vitalstatistix dislikes his brother-in-law. But one day he grumblingly agrees to accompany his wife to Lutetia. In the carriage, Impedimenta tactlessly extols her brother's virtues. The chief explodes suddenly. "Homeopathix is a fool," he says angrily. To which Impedimenta replies with equal vehemence, "But he's a rich fool!"

When Murphy's Law runs riot

If you plan anything too meticulously, chances are that it will somehow be maliciously mauled and spoiled

George Netto
gnettomunnar@rediffmail.com

Nothing can be more frustrating than to have one's personal and meticulously drawn-up plans thwarted at the eleventh hour by unforeseen developments. Something totally unexpected crops up now and then, most inopportunely of course, disrupting one's habitual routine or a much-anticipated family outing, a holiday abroad, or a get-together. In the process one is left sulking – if not, outright morose.

It's Murphy's Law, of course, at diabolical work. Pitted against it, one usually faces a no-win situation. Then, even the best laid-out plans are inevitably destined to go awry.

Such exasperations are many: the intruder, usually a salesman, who repeatedly thumbs your doorbell when you are napping post-lunch after a stressful morning at work.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Or an idling neighbour drops in for a chat, uninvited, when you are struggling to complete an urgent official assignment at home. Or you return from work dog-tired, looking forward to peace and quiet – only to be greeted by uproar and bedlam, courtesy the clamorous and inconsiderate tourists in the adjacent homestay. Or, to your acute dismay, the water supply is disrupted only when you have a houseful of guests. Or, puncturing your cherished reputation for punctuality, one fateful day you are unavoidably delayed and reach the office late to find that the boss has come in unexpectedly early and, what's worse, has summoned you thrice.

Way back in 1975, a friend and I stood in the blistering heat in a mile-long queue that snaked towards the ticket-counter of a cinema in Kochi where the blockbuster film *Sholay* had just been released. Perspiring profusely, we patiently inched along buoyed by the prospect of seeing the much-publicised movie. Therefore, imagine our utter consternation when, on reaching the ticket-counter at long last, the clerk abruptly shuttered his window with the laconic remark, "Sorry, housefull!"

It may sound cynical but I have found that if anything is planned too meticulously, chances are that it will somehow be maliciously mauled by the murky machinations of Murphy's Law.

THE HINDU
magazine
INSIDE THE DRIVERLESS AGE

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Self-driving cars are advancing globally with AI and safety technology, but fully autonomous level 4/5 vehicles remain rare. ('Inside the driverless age'; Feb. 15) Gradual adoption with smart safety systems, policy development, and EV, AV integration is expected post 2030, improving road safety and mobility.
N.S. Reddy

The writer's vivid account of riding in Zoox and Waymo vehicles in Austin and Las Vegas highlights how far autonomous technology has come in controlled settings abroad. As an Indian reader, one cannot help but note the vast gap in our own country, where chaotic traffic, inconsistent road markings, and mixed vehicle types pose great challenges.
M. Barathi

The article captures both the promise and unease surrounding autonomous vehicles. While technology is advancing, concerns about safety, accountability and data privacy remain valid. India should not rush towards adoption without clear regulations.
S.M. Jeeva

Love stories

Platforms such as Bunny Up Network and Marzi are very helpful for Persons with Disabilities and forlorn senior citizens who are seeking companionship. ('Accessibility in modern romance'; Feb. 15) Such initiatives also warrant attention from the government and civil society.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

It was heartening to read about the good Samaritans who have started organisations that enable the disabled to find romance and kinship. More such initiatives should mushroom across the country, and dedicated professionals who can spare their time and energy to help PWDs and senior citizens should head them.
C.V. Aravind

Upholding culture

The *kavand* needs more recognisation as it not only augments the livelihood of Siddhi women but also represents an important part of their culture and community. ('Madras checks meets African memory'; Feb. 15) More of these exhibitions should be held to boost India's rich cultural wealth.
Gopika A. Gopan

Disappearing readers

Libraries are shutting down, citing a drastic drop in visitors. ('Shrinking space for books'; Feb. 15) And when we urge youngsters to visit libraries, they say only a few libraries exist. We need more libraries, more literary magazines, and more book review sections.
S. Sundareswara Pandiyan

Correction

The article 'Madras checks meets African memory' in the *Magazine* edition dated Feb. 15, 2026, misstated the name of the brand — Original Madras Trading Company. The error is regretted.
— ***Editor***

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Deafening silence
Technology, intended as a tool for connection, has ironically deepened isolation
Vijayanand Bansode

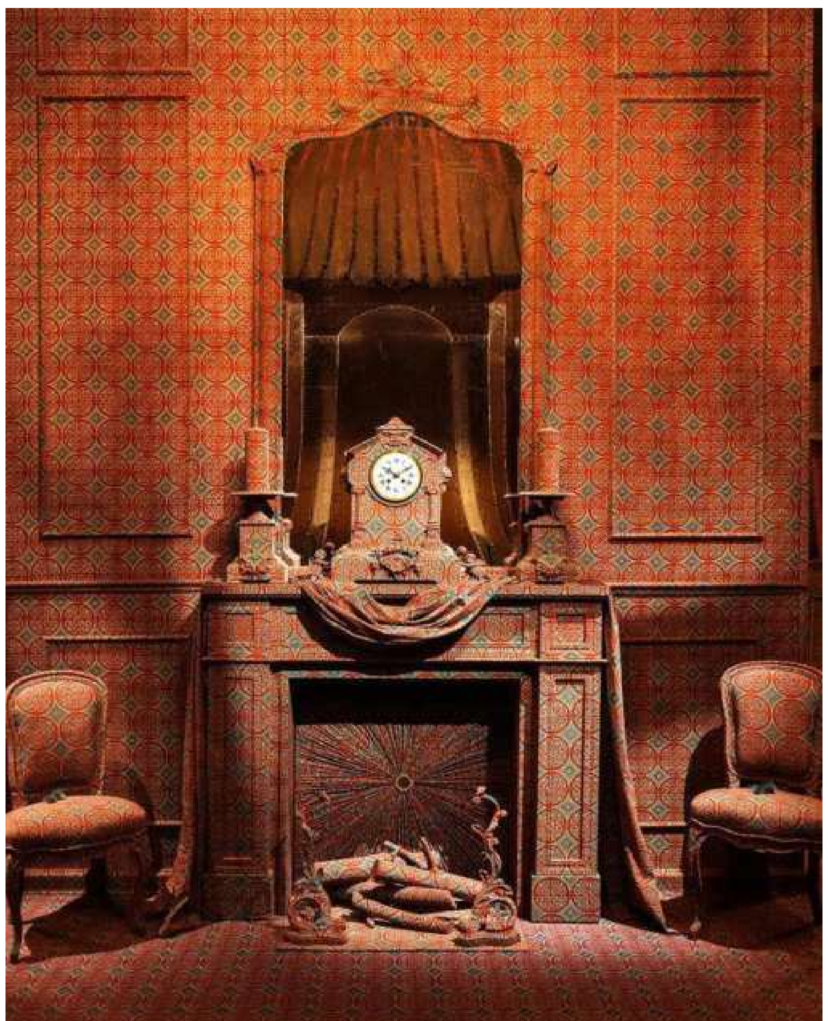
Not just playthings
Toys are no longer silent companions; some listen, some track habits
Adhithya J.

The world of bioscope
Enthralled by a slide show of rare pictures that entertained and amused
Sujith Sandur

Nostalgia over the wristwatch
Back then, the timepiece was a marker of status
Buddhadev Nandi

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, February 22, 2026



INDIA, FRANCE AND A COMMON THREAD

With printed cottons and silk installations, landmark exhibition *Ce qui se trame* in Paris underlined four centuries of Indo-French textile dialogue. And the conversation is geared to continue

(Clockwise from below) Leila Alaoui's photographs; L'Antechambre; Ashta Butail's *7 Yokings of Felicity*; Kunaal Seolekar's *Yaksha* Vase; a selection of saris from contemporary Indian designers; and Sumakshi Singh's 'lace' sculpture. (SOPHIA TAILLET)

Uthra Rajgopal

At Galerie des Gobelins in Paris, the air hangs heavy with the legacy of craftsmanship. It was here, amidst a centuries-old tradition of tapestry excellence, that the textile synergy between India and France found its most iconic stage. *Ce qui se trame* (Textile Matters) was less an exhibition and more of an immersive spectacle – a sensory odyssey through the soul of two nations, spanning four centuries, that have mutually inspired crafted textile traditions. The title alludes to the weft of the loom and the colloquial expression in French for 'what's happening' – suggesting the creative alchemy occurring behind the scenes.

Born of a visionary mandate announced by French President Emmanuel Macron during his 2024 visit to India, the project emerged as a cornerstone of a new, ambitious cultural roadmap. The Institut Français and Mobilier National – which manages over 100,000 pieces of historic and contemporary furniture, carpets, and tapestries – were charged to not only honour but to actively harness the living heritage of two nations bound by a shared devotion to craftsmanship. The month-long exhibition served as a crucible for Indian and French designers to ignite new narratives.

Two nation exchange

The task of realising the exhibition fell to a formidable creative pairing: Mayank Mansingh Kaul, Delhi's textile curator, and Christian Louboutin, the globally renowned red-soled luxury shoe designer with a deep love for India. Together, they infused the gallery with meticulous precision and theatrical flair, drawing together a rare assemblage from major museums and private collections across India and France. "This exhibition shows how Indian textiles have evolved through cultural exchanges," says Kaul, "turning what could have been a project about two national identities into one of a shared culture and aesthetic."

The exhibition began within L'Antechambre, a reconstructed 18th-century French apartment. Paying homage to the historic European love for Indian printed cottons, this *mise-en-scène* was elevated to a maximalist crescendo. The entire interior was seamlessly enveloped in naturally dyed hand-block printed cloth specially commissioned from master embroiderer Jean-François Lesage's House of Kandadu in Puducherry – even a strategically placed globe was cloaked in the textile, a silent nod to the global trade routes of the past.

Emerging from this heady love affair was the French printed textile, which came to be known as Toile de Jouy. Here, visitors passed through Mughal-inspired niches lined with the fabric and encountered a 'madder-root-nest' installation, *Travelling Roots*, by Lesage Intérieurs, handcrafted and assembled in South India and on loan from the collection of fashion entrepreneur Shon Randhawa. This sequence set a clear tone for honouring the past and present cultural ties, a springboard for French and Indian collaborative craftsmanship.

Of lace and brocade

From the vibrant legacy of printed cottons, the exhibition shifted into serene white-on-white *chikankari*, muslins, and lace-inspired artworks. Highlights included Victoire de Brantes' Vitraux Brodés (part of Villa Swagatam, the Indo-French cultural residency programme launched in 2023), which explored traditional techniques to create embroidered stained-glass windows, and Gurugram-based artist Sumakshi Singh's 'lace' sculpture: a haunting, ghost-like marvel embroidered onto a sacrificial base that vanishes to leave behind a fragile memory of thread.

"The work responds to the presentation of historical and contemporary expressions of handmade lace," Kaul explains. "It creates a conversation between what is seen as quintessentially a French medium, and one which has emerged independently out of her own practise through the act of embroidery." In this moment, the enduring power of delicate fibre was revealed, bridging the gap between centuries-old French lacemaking and the avant-garde frontiers of modern art.

Next came the opulence of gold brocade – fundamentally transformed by the advent of the Jacquard loom, a revolution that positioned Lyon and Varanasi as dual poles of weaving excellence. The push and pull of the shuttle and the interplay of industrial and aesthetic imaginations were beautifully underlined in Ashta Butail's installation, *7 Yokings of Felicity*. Suspended high above and stretched like a celestial accordion, its silk and metallic yarns projected a rhythmic dance of light across contemporary Mughal-inspired florals and a 19th-century silk panel from the Palace of Versailles.

This luxury found a poignant counterpoint in Lakshmi Madhavan's art grounded in her work with the *kasavu* weavers of Balaramapuram in Kerala. Creating a spiral of loom shuttles – originally 96 – wrapped with threads and hair, the artist presented the grandeur of the finished textile against the tools of the trade, serving as a sharp reminder of the labouring bodies and the quiet endurance of the weavers.

Imaginative collaborations

Ascending the grand staircase, the focus shifted to the sculptural majesty of the sari. Taking centrestage was Raw Mango, the iconic label that has masterfully recalibrated the contemporary sari. Beyond its role as a fashion house, Raw Mango was presented through Kaul's lens as a vital "image maker by showcasing the sari in fashion and motion in artistic films and photography".

The scenography then transitioned to a dramatic mock runway. Here, Louboutin's signature mirrored plinths elevated mannequins draped in archival couture from Dior, Chanel, and Yves Saint Laurent. These were flanked by monumental, embroidered panels by Mumbai-based visual artist Rithika Merchant in collaboration with the Chanakya School of Craft – created by the hands of over 300 embroiderers. Behind them, the iconic Sabyasachi sari, as worn by businesswoman Natasha Poonawalla at the 2022 Met Gala, with a Schiaparelli sculptural bodice, stood as a statuesque moment of cultural fusion.

Elsewhere, the exhibition pivoted to the visceral, celebrating the 'power of the hand' through portraits of women garment factory workers by French-Moroccan photographer Leila Alaoui. The dialogue became increasingly radical with fibre works by titans such as sculptor Mrinalini Mukherjee and American artist Sheila Hicks. A solitary Nagaland textile introduced a primal dimension, challenging the viewer to look towards the spiritual connections of the craft.

Mapping new routes

The finale returned to total immersion: scaffolding draped in shades of indigo denim, a fabric bridging industrial France and India. Evoking an Indian salon and punctuated by flamboyant tapestries of artist Viswanadhan, alongside images of Le Corbusier's legacy in India, the visitor was absorbed into a series of short films by French artist Elèonore Geissler playfully tracing Indian textile techniques and patterns through stop-motion animation.

Ultimately, *Ce qui se trame* imprinted a singular truth: the tapestry of Franco-Indian relations remains profoundly interwoven. While an intriguing tension existed in the curation – Kaul's effort to subvert Orientalist stereotypes occasionally leaned into a canonical roll-call of blockbuster exports such as muslins, chintzes, Kashmir shawls and brocades – the exhibition succeeded in mapping the way forward for further imaginative Franco-Indian collaborations. Further iterations of this dialogue will soon be announced across major institutions in India.

The writer is an independent curator of textiles based in the U.K.

Vinita Makhija

Palace as platform

Helmed by Gauravi Kumari of Jaipur, the Artisan Collective has grown from 30 to 70 artisans in just one year

Artisans at the PDKF Collective in Jaipur; and (left) Gauravi Kumari. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Art grows where patronage recognises it. For centuries, palaces and royal households understood this and nurtured crafts, sustained guilds, and offered artisans continuity. Museums, conversely, often stand as mausoleums of that generosity, vitrines filled with the residue of power once exercised thoughtfully.

But every so often, patronage steps out of the archives into the present tense. The second edition of the Princess Diya Kumari Foundation (PDKF, a Rajasthan-based non-profit) Collective, held on the grounds of Jaipur's City Palace, did precisely that.

The Collective is helmed by princess Gauravi Kumari, who is also an ambassador for luxury brands such as Jimmy Choo and Kama Ayurveda. But at home, the young royal's focus is on PDKF.

What began as an intimate curation of 30 artisans last year, expanded to nearly 70 this time – with a focus on crafts originating from Rajasthan such as block prints, lac and *patwa* jewellery. We also spotted a Kanchipuram weaver and an artisan from Dharwad in Karnataka with *kasuti* embroidery.

According to designer Anamika Khanna, platforms such as the Collective matter because they do more than showcase work, they create visibility and belief. "When women see other women leading and creating, it quietly affirms that they can do the same – as designers, as entrepreneurs, as the face of their own journeys."

Making craft stronger

At a time when initiatives such as activist Jaya Jaitley's Delhi Haat, designer Roshan Kalapesi's Paramparik Karigar, and craft activist Laila Tyabji's Dastkar bazaars (begun with five others) are so prevalent, the success of a new collective lies not merely in aligning with a cause, but in having a strong point of view. "The new-generation weavers and craftspeople have tacit knowledge and skill, but they are also tech-savvy now," says Toolika Gupta, director of Jaipur-based Indian Institute of Crafts and Design. "The right guidance, with some financial assistance, can take them further."

At PDKF, Kumari explains, they intervene on multiple levels: confidence-building, visibility and access. "I've seen women who once hesitated to speak about their work now confidently explain pricing, process, and provenance to buyers. These shifts may seem small, but they are transformative," she says. "When women begin to see themselves as decision-makers, the craft itself becomes stronger."

Kumari is clear-eyed about the role consumers play in the ecosystem. "Responsible patronage begins with curiosity and respect. Ask questions about the process, pricing, time, and materials," she says, noting that several participants from last year returned with repeat patronage and continued orders. "Wherever you choose to buy, support platforms that centre artisans, prioritise fair practices, and credit makers. Craft survives not through sympathy, but through informed appreciation and conscious choice."

Read the full story on magazine.thehindu.com.

The writer is a Mumbai-based fashion stylist.